

The Christian Story and the Christian School (4): A Defense of the Narrative Approach in Reformed Christian Education

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Scripture References

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Galatians

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This article continues a series of articles that have identified the narrative approach as one in which the Christian school through its teachers must tell a specific and distinctive story. The story, rooted in the correct source, must reflect the truth of the inspired Scriptures as summarized in the creeds of the Christian church. Dr. Bolt defends the narrative approach in *The Christian Story and the Christian School* and argues that "a concept of narrative could help resolve some of the problems involved with maintaining distinctively Christian education" (Bolt, p. 158).

The articles have reviewed the analysis and description by Dr. Bolt of the educational enterprise during the late twentieth century. These articles demonstrated that the real problem of public education is the lack of a consistent and coherent vision to guide the vast and unwieldy enterprise—an enterprise that is subjected to all the social and political pressures of the present time. Dr. Bolt concludes that, because of the many diverse opinions of those involved in the movement, it is impossible for the school to possess and develop a consistent and coherent vision. He analyzes the problem as follows: "The conflicting expectations for public education seemed to create an unsolvable problem." In addition Bolt writes that the "conflicts in educational philosophy are part of a broader cultural warfare, and as the Christian knows all too well, this conflict is serious because it is spiritual in nature" (Bolt, p. 47).

Christian parents and teachers ought to be more convinced than ever that public schools do not and cannot provide the Christian nurture that Christian students need. Christian schools, working to develop a coherent and consistent vision based on the truth of the Word of God, are an absolute necessity if students are to be taught a Reformed worldview and be given a truly Reformed perspective. Even if the public schools were able to resolve their differences and develop a consistent vision, we know that the consistent vision developed by public schools would be contrary to the Word of God and would be Satan's tool of subversion. Such training and education is contrary to the promise made by Reformed Christians, that to the best of their ability they would provide distinctive Christian education for their children.

Dr. Bolt examines several aspects of the culture in which the schools exist to prove his contention that the narrative approach is one that will be most helpful in providing sound Christian education. In the chapter entitled "Critical Questions About Our Culture" (*The Christian Story*, et. al.), he describes and analyzes the influence and development of modernism, postmodernism, individualism, relativism, pluralism, secularism, and paganism. It is possible to review only briefly the analysis by Bolt of several of these ideas and attempt to see how they impinge upon and affect the task of the educator. In the diverse dimensions of the present cultural crisis, he states that an underlying common thread exists. He argues in his discussion of the critical questions about our culture that the "loss of narrative unity—loss of a common story and unified cultural memory—is the one consistent feature giving rise to individualism and secularism, while pluralism and paganism represent the rise of alternative narratives" (Bolt, p. 49).

Modernism and Postmodernism

The term "modernism" is used often, both in a popular and philosophic sense. In the popular sense, modernism refers to chronology and speaks of things being up to date or speaks of progress. Used in the philosophic sense, modernists refer to a time that in their opinion is superior to previous ages of myth, superstition, and religion as guides to human understanding and conduct.

René Descartes, a seventeenth century philosopher, is considered by many to be the father of modern thought. Descartes sought mathematical-like certainty in thought and began by systematically doubting everything until he arrived at a foundation of truth that, he believed, could not be doubted. Descartes said that systematic doubt removed everything except the one certain fact of his personal existence. Cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I exist) was the basic tenet of the philosophy of Descartes. Therefore he concluded that certainty is to be found in the rational self.

The thinking of modernism is that the beliefs of the early Christian church, the Middle Ages, and the Reformation period must be changed. Beliefs concerning the sinfulness of humanity and the need for revelation and grace must be replaced by a belief that humanity is not sinful, that divine revelation is not necessary, and that humans can save themselves. Modernism teaches the erroneous and detestable idea that one can know the truth about oneself and the meaning of the world apart from God's revealed Word in the Scriptures. Modernism teaches that man's reason is the source of truth. Martin Luther in his commentary on [Galatians 3:7](#) ^[1] said that when man "will measure God without the word and believe Him according to the wisdom of reason, he hath no right opinion...."

The belief that an autonomous and rational person is the final judge of all truth caused, among other things, the development of the new political and social experiment called liberal democracy or rule by the people. Dr. Bolt writes that

Prior to the modern era rulers, governors, and magistrates were considered in some sense servants of God, accountable to divine law.... One feared God's servant, the king, because one ultimately feared God. Religious convictions were publicly expressed and deemed essential for public wellbeing. Liberal democracy, on the other hand, attempted to establish political order on the basis of reason, universally available to all people, whatever the religious conviction (Bolt, p. 53).

One of the results of the establishment of liberal democracy has been the deliberate effort to secularize and remove the Christian story, tradition, and moral order revealed in Scripture from public life. Religion has become something strictly private. Our public world is the universal one of facts, science, technology, process, and efficiency. Our private world is the specific and individual one of values, opinions, beliefs, and religious conviction. Bolt cautions Christian educators to beware the error of technique and process as the sole and prime concern of education. Christian education must in its concern with the facts and the process not neglect its most important task, the telling of the Christian story.

Dr. Bolt also expresses concern that Christians not accept the split between private and public life and the withdrawal of the Christian faith to the inner private chamber (Bolt, pp. 53, 54). If Christian schools are to be truly Christian, the Christian faith cannot be withdrawn to the private chamber. Supporters of Christian education must recognize and must insist that the Christian

faith be evident in the instruction, because the doctrines of the Christian faith are absolutely essential for all distinctive Christian education.

Pluralism/Relativism

Postmodernism rejects the ideology of modernism that universal reason is the source of all truth. Postmodernism says that prejudice and bias are unavoidable, and therefore universal reason divorced from all religious, social, moral, political commitments is impossible. The postmodernist contends that all human thought is embedded in a particular narrative, and therefore bias and prejudice are unavoidable. He claims there is no point of view outside all tradition from which one can offer a universal and unbiased judgment.

Postmodernism affects political life because it rejects the universal rights of individual men, a theory that was explicit in the ideology of modernism. The pluralism of groups or classes is the new point of orientation. According to postmodernist thinkers, rights belong not to individuals but to diverse groups with particular needs and interests. According to postmodernism the language of rights must be specific—rights of women, rights of blacks, rights of homosexuals, rights of native people.

Although some might view the postmodern rejection of universal rationality in favor of prejudice and presupposition as a welcome development, Bolt asserts that postmodernism is not acceptable for Christian educators because, like modernism, it denies the existence of any certain or universal truths. Bolt states that "for the Christian who believes that the gospel and God's moral law are universally true, this wholesale relativism presents a formidable challenge" (Bolt, p. 59).

Individualism

Individualism, according to Bolt, is the quintessential fruit of modernity. In his discussion of individualism, as the essential characteristic of modern societies, he indicates that modern individualism creates profound moral problems for society because all moral decisions are subjective, and all moral decisions are based on individual choice and preference. Bolt writes as follows: "From a moral standpoint, the issue is clear.... If it is all a matter of individual choice and preference, if it is simply my subjective value versus your subjective value, how can we decide on any communal good?" (Bolt, p. 66).

Dr. Bolt advocates "communities of memory" as the solution and antidote for the profound moral problems resulting from modern individualism. He defines a community of memory as one that does not forget its past. The school as a community of memory would be involved in retelling its story, and in so doing it will present examples of men and women who have exemplified the meaning of the community. Bolt argues in chapter six of *The Christian School*, et. al. that "a community of memory is precisely what the Christian school is called to be" (Bolt, p. 69).

Secularism and Paganism

Dr. Bolt notes that society has moved more and more in a secularist direction. Religion and the rules of religion, say the secularists, must be separated from the main business of society. Religion is private and is not a legitimate part of the public scene. But Dr. Bolt observes that secularism does not work. By denying the legitimacy of religion and the rules of true religion in society, man's attempts to make society and life in the world better have not resulted in a new and better world, but have resulted in the rise of nihilism and moral anarchy.

Dr. Bolt also notes that paganism has been one of the consequences of secularism, pluralism, and relativism. Paganism is idolatry because it deliberately and intentionally substitutes false deities for the living God. Paganism is destructive because it removes all restraints on the sinful desires of human beings. The Christian, who by nature is not one wit different from the pagan, must beware this deliberate and intentional destruction of the moral rule in society. Paganism is a power that cannot be changed, but the Christian must at all costs avoid it. It has existed in every age, and members of the church have been commanded to beware the contamination and destruction caused by paganism.

Concluding Comments

Dr. Bolt's examination of these cultural developments leads him to conclude that the Christian religion is no longer the privileged or majority faith of the West but is instead a public minority religion. That this is true can be observed in culture and society, and one can observe the results of this development in the public schools. The public schools no longer evidence the influence of the Christian religion. They have become secular and pagan. Many Christian schools have been affected by the influences of secularism and paganism. The battle against these malicious influences presents a challenge to those who are busy maintaining distinctively Christian schools.

The only acceptable schools for the covenant children of God are Christian schools that are distinctive because of their insistence on what is Reformed and scriptural. A significant function of the schools is to conserve the wisdom of the Christian tradition—the Christian story—as that wisdom has been garnered from the Holy Scriptures. The existence of distinctively Christian schools is a witness to the faith of those who establish and use these schools. Distinctive Christian schools are as important today as they have ever been, and the challenge of maintaining such schools is as demanding as it has ever been.

It is appropriate to speak of the Christian school as a "community of memory" because all communities have memories, sometimes called traditions. We should observe that the Bible often refers to memories when it uses the term "remember." Psalm 105:5 ^[2] urges one to remember God's marvelous works, His wonders, and the judgment of His mouth. Ecclesiastes 12:1 ^[3] declares: "Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth."

The Christian school is the place where the supporting community seeks to pass on to the next generation its God-given heritage, i.e., the Christian story. In this sense the school demonstrates that it is a community of memory that employs the narrative approach to prepare students for citizenship in a specific community. The school in this community encourages virtuous living in agreement with the history, the values, and the traditions gleaned from the Word of God. The Christian community remembers the sacred history recorded in the Scriptures, the teachings and doctrines of Holy Scripture, and the history of the Christian church. The community of memory will be involved in narrating the story of the past—its successes and failures. Good narrative will indicate that all happens according to the plan of God and in the way of sin and grace. Essential to the telling of the correct story and telling it correctly is the important reality that this earth is not the Christian's home.

The narrative approach, although essential and necessary, will not save the children and young people. Education does not save, only God through Christ saves. Saved sinful children and young people must be instructed so that they will learn to live in the world and participate in every legitimate aspect of the culture but as those who are passing through this life as pilgrims and strangers that seek a better country.

(... to be continued.)

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[1] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=Galatians+3:7>

[2] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=Psalm+105:5>

[3] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=Ecclesiastes+12:1>